

THE DANCE SITUATION IN THE U.S.

By V. F. Beliajus



Clem's figuring out a new "Ol' Time" dance to: "I had a drink about an hour ago, and it's gone all to my head." (Drawing by John Mitchell of Gary, Indiana).

Having been away from dancing and traveling for two whole years enabled me to view more comprehensively the dance situation during my present trips. I covered during the summer of 1953 some 21,000 miles from coast to coast and border to border. In many places I was able to be present incognito (as I've become much fatter and older during the last two years) and observe without obstruction. The over-all situation is as follows:

The folk dance became more stabilized. Where it was going over-board it toned down. Fewer people may dance fanatically in some localities but more people dance it in far wider areas than it was done two years ago.

Square dancing lost out in popularity to greater extent (except, perhaps, in California's "Deep South") and that the rat-race speed with which certain localities danced their squares, is practically gone from the picture (except in spots of Los Angeles).

Round dancing tripled in popularity and at the expense of square dancing only. Square dancers should view that with alarm, for it is their baby which they reared and sponsored and now have to give way to, and they are being kicked to the corner, like parents by ingrate children.

Square dancing could have continued in its popularity had it chosen a different manner of behavior. There is a great deal more to the American lore. It is rich in regionalism and local flavor. Those who chose to do only American folk dancing could have had included the New England Contra, the Kentucky Running Sets, the Ozark jig-square, Dancers, Quadrilles, Singing Circles of which there is an endless number, and the other square and long-ways forms of Indiana, Missouri, North Carolina and the South West and West. It would have made a rounded and well satisfying, enjoyable evening of dancing.

But such was not the situation. Instead it accepted only one phase of the American dance, ignored all others and indulged in innuendos and semi-fascist-chauvinistic remarks regarding folk dancing of foreign extraction. Ignorance breeds hatred, that's a well known fact and it holds true in every phase of life and in every country. Fear does the same. Both of these factors; fear lest folk dancing will wean away square dancers, and not knowing any folk dancing themselves to teach at their sessions in order to hold the interest of the square dancers, gave rise to the birth of the present rounds. There is just so much one can do with square dancing, especially when one limits himself to one style of American dance. It is fun for beginners, but once one is not a beginner any more they strive for something more challenging. What is more challenging than the endless variety folk dancing offers? Thus, to the once enthusiastic square dancer, folk dancing is the next step. This was also realized by the leader of the square dance, but with greater comprehension. First, there was a type of "under-the-breath" remarks that folk

dancing is "foreign", alien, un-American and the dancers are a bunch of "communists" and no "red-blooded" American should ever be caught doing it. Since that still didn't frighten some dancers, then they restored to the creation of American Round Dances. Whenever that statement was made the word "American" was "under-lined" in bold type or italics, even tho it was an oral statement and not a printed one, that is to make one feel the other fellow is a red-vodka lover. So... they, instead, themselves set out to become master dancers, copying European forms, mostly from Alexandrovskia rehashed, worn thin, and handed down even as far as a hundred times removed, plus much tango and jitter-bug, whether it fits the music or not (who cares?), and for an extra measure they add the kitchen stove, too. These master choreographers claim that European dancing is impossible for an ordinary American to do, too complicated. Of course, there are exhibitionistic and complicated folk dances, but for the most part the folk dances are by far easier and more fun to do than some of their creations which leave the dancer so fudged up and distressed that it makes him feel like a nincompoop.

At the Chicago International Square Dance program there was a couple who were to teach their latest master creation to a group of eager to learn. The Masters demonstrated it several times. They were in their glory, happy and elated with their masterpiece which the entranced plebs couldn't catch on. The period ended and no one had learned the latest creation. But the Mrs. Master Choreographer went up to one acquaintance she saw after the session, expressing the hope that the next time they see each other she will have "a new round dance to demonstrate. Wasn't this one a lulu?" It sure was!

In Wisconsin, at a State Fair, four elegantly dressed presented in period costumes (about the turn of the last century), some "Old Time American Couple Dances", and the oldest dance on this "Olde Tyme" presentation was "Waltz of the Bells", which is barely four years old. The dound dances sure age quickly. And if one dare put on the "Third Man Theme" on a program among round dancers, he'd be thrown out of the hall. What? Last year's dance? Doesn't he know the latest?

Now, round dance groups come into being, separated and divorced from the square dance groups, which dances some of these round dancers don't even wish to do. There is just a semblance of outer harmony during festivals and jamborees where square and round dancers meet together with as much love as two mother-in-laws who feel that the other's child robbed her from her darling baby. But, the round dancing may be popular now it is not here to stay. Fads came and went as do all the creations, for they have no depth, no feeling, no spirit and no sociability. They are cold, aimless and anti-social. But folk and square dancing was here and will be here. They will not be out of fashion neither tomorrow nor some hundred years from now. They are ageless and know no bound.

I'm not against the round dance as such. Round dancing existed for centuries and will continue. Tho they are ever changing. What I am against is the purpose behind the present trend which is two-fold: exploitation by record companies whose sole aim is "more idiotic creations—more record sales"; and the amount and type of round dances being put out. Every week an acrobatic number of too many figures in sequence for too short of a phrase of music by too many self appointed and egoistic personages who think they know how to dance.

Rounders may likewise claim that their type of dance is an American expression, hence folk dance likewise. According to my opinion it is not an American expression, but that of an individual, most often with un-American understanding, for American people are great mixers and round dancing does not permit mixing. Each person brings his partner and wants to dance with that person mixing. Folk dancing is informal, it is pleasurable, it means mixing and dancing with others and it means being a part of a group.

There are still many Rounders among whom the memory of evenings amidst friendliness in square dance clubs is still fresh. These, as yet may be excluded from the anti-socialites and they still dance squares among their founds with the original delight. Let us hope that these square-rounders will continue dancing with their feet on the ground and heads beneath the clouds.

In Chicago during the International Square Dance Jamboree, at a dinner in McKinley Park, where the well loved and highly respected, Dr. "Pappy" Shaw was feted by a number of local and visiting leaders, he expressed a warning against the flood of trash now coming out and

which he said, out of twenty barely one was worth a glance (not verbatim) and said, to the effect that we either put an end to the round dance or it will be the end of the square dance. Perhaps we should heed the warning of the patriarch of the American Square dance.

What is the remedy? I really don't know if there is one. Northern California and other folk dance groups seem to have a very plausible idea which works well, and many of their groups do it without ado and brass bands. They folk dance and they square dance, all in the same evening and on the same floor, and everyone has a good time. After all, there should be no distinction made. Square dancing is folk dancing. One calls their native dance Hopak or Kujawiak, Hambo, Beseda, Suktinis, or what ever, and in the United States we refer to our type of dance as Square Dance, but regardless the name, it is all folk. And, we, being a nation of nations, should feel even more elated and more proud of the fact that more than any other country in the world, we are composed of so many different racial and nationality groups all of who brought the best and oldest forms of their own culture to enrich ours. Why destroy it and give it derogatory names? Who from among you can prove that there is absolutely no European blood in him? None, for if he could he'd be an Amerindian, live somewhere in a miserable reservation and do semi-nude war dances with a feather over his head. The Chicago Square Jamboree of last October, had the right idea. Let that be the beginning of a new trend. Litvak, Polak, Jew, Swede, Mexican and Negro too—Americans All!

Last Summer I was in St. Croix, Wisconsin with my Minneapolis Scandinavian buddies and there we witnessed a group present a series of American square dances. A Swede called and eight coupled dressed in Danish costumes employing a most unusual form of gait, did the squares. This, I thought, was the most wonderful example of integration and the creation of regional flavor with a natural outgrowth, true and pure American.

Now, what about Ethnic Dance Groups?

That, again, is an entirely different subject. The purposes are entirely different from the general run of American folk dancers who do their dancing for purely social-recreational reasons.

The Ethnic dancer is organized to perpetuate his ancestral lore and folk culture. To him, besides the social aspect there is also a love for the folk ways peculiar to his ancestors of which he is justly proud, whatever the background may be. He has the certain feeling for the dances which very few who did not share his background's characteristic experiences, would appreciate or would even be interested. To him "miss-dancing" would be a desecration and he strives to retain that folkloric culture in all its purity as it existed for the past hundreds or thousands of years. Who more, than a true ethnic dancer could appreciate this feeling?

But the American folk dancers, especially those of mixed backgrounds or who feel no strong ties to any of their parental ancestry, dance only for the joy and fun the folk dance affords to them. Sure, they'd like to be aware of some characteristics and national traits, but they don't want to be burdened by it. Then, tho, it is almost next to impossible for all folk dancers to catch the spirit of each nationality each time a new tune is played. It would be too much to expect it from them. It will suffice, tho, to know that the dancer by having danced an Arab Debka, Greek Syrtos, Bosnian Oro, Catalan Sardana, a Lithuanian Sustas, and Israeli Horra was exposed to an here-to-fore unknown culture to him and thus gained a better knowledge and appreciation for the neighbor who stands next to him and whose hand he holds in warm friendship and brotherhood. You will find that these are friendlier people.

Then too, there are non-Ethnic groups who do a select-ed nationality dance with so much traditionalism in every respect, including costumes that they not only outshine and out-ethnic groups but they do them proud and put easily to shame an ill-trained disinterested ethnic group. More power to them. These are specializing groups with devotion to a style or cause. Such synthetic ethnic groups are found in California, particularly in the Bay Area, and some scattered groups elsewhere.

Guide: his castle is over three hundred years old.. Nothing has been changed, alteted or fixed.

Tourist: They must have the same landlord we do.

BOOKS

IGRA KOLO (Dance the Kolo), John Filcich, 3257 E. 14th St., Oakland 1, Calif. Mimeographed. \$1.00.

John Filcich, who needs no introduction to Californians came out with an expanded collection of kolos and some Slovene dances (27 kolos, 1 polka, Drmes and versions, 4 Slovene). All kolos are familiar to the kolo-lovers, at least in name. Some are preceeded by helpful introductions. In his preface, in this "Short History" section, John mentions the fact that the kolos which were done by the older local ethnic groups are of greater antiquity than those brought over by the present flow of immigrants. With this statement I heartily agree Kolos with the intricate basic step is now becoming a type for folkloric group, down Yugoslavia way, while most of the elite, or run of the people seem to go in more and more for a Zhikino or Kokonjeste type of Kolo. However, the good old Yugos of Pittsburgh are likewise in a very creative mood. Their dances likewise became popular in the States. John's collection has all of these; old traditional, the latest from yonder and the latest from hither. His preface will be very informative to the newcoming kolophil. All in all it will be a buck well spent.

AMERIKOS LIETUVIU VARDYNAS: Lithuanian Days, 9204 So. Broadway, Los Angeles 3, Calif. 280 p. \$5.00

This book, printed in Lithuanian, is the American Lithuanian "Who's Who". Short biographic sketches of Lithuanians in the U.S. who are in any way active in public life, here is but one disturbing note in this particular book—the exclusion of such names as that of Pijus Grigaitis, Juozas Tysliava, Kristina Grinius, Mikas Vaidyla and many others were omitted. Whether willfully or not, I do not know. This makes the book incomplete. Otherwise it is valuable, informative and interesting.

PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE, Nathan Ausubel, Crown Publishers, N. Y., 360 p.; 1200 illustrations; 8-1/2" x 11". \$5.00.

Mr. Nathan Ausubel, author of his excellent book "A Treasury of Jewish Folklore" and other, has now come out with something truly stupendous and magnificent. What Prof. Graetz did in words with the Jewish History, this, as pictorial sequel, was done by Mr. Ausubel with 1200 illustrations selected from over 10,000 pictures of every form. Though Professor Graetz's history consists of six heavy volumes and Ausubel's but one, Mr. Ausubel, in a very clear and concise manner covered much more ground than the famous professor, for he also included brief histories of the great number of the little known Jewish "Lost Tribes" found as Chinese, Hindu, Afani, Bukharan, Negro-Falasha, Karaites and other types of Jews. Ausubel likewise delved into the history of the arts, drama, literature and every other phase, which the great Historian omitted and at the time one can learn much in less time about this eternal, indestructible Martyr Race. This remarkable and monumental works shall certainly be a "must" for every Jewish home and institution and of the non-Jew as well; he'll learn a great deal and those possessed with the prejudices due to ignorance will become wiser and more tolerant.

Litvak

Litvak is a Jewish term with which Lithuanian Jews called the Lithuanian Gentile. In turn, Polish, or non-Lithuanian Jews called the Lithuanian Jews "Litvaks". Among the Polish Jews, particularly the Hassidim, the term "Litvak" became to mean not only a name for a Jew of historic Lithuania (that is, including Byelorussia and the Ukraine), but also it carried the connotation of "wordly" and "skeptical", for Lithuanian Jewry was given a adopt readily "German" garb and literature and to abandon the traditional, and a Lithuanian Jew was always skeptical of the Hassidic wonder-working rabbis and of other miraculous deeds.

In this country, up until very recently, "Litvak" continued to apply to Lithuanian Jews only, of which there are great numbers in the United States, but of late this appellation is coming to refer to the Lithuanians themselves. Many Americans who seem to be unable to pronounce the word "Lithuanian", find "Litvak" simple. It bears no derogatory connotation, but rather is a nickname, as one would call a person from Indiana, "Hoosier."